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“COME IN AND BE OUR GUESTS”
HISTORIC HOTELS ALONG THE SUNCOAST

by Louise K. Frisbie

But for a quirk of fate, Cedar Key might have become the metropolis of Florida’s Gulf coast, those thirteen Moorish minarets on the Tampa Bay Hotel might have adorned one named the Cedar Key Hotel, and Tampa might have remained the village that it was in 1880.

It almost happened.

As Henry B. Plant considered a western terminus for his railroad, one which would also be a seaport for his steamship lines, Cedar Key looked good. It was then an important port and manufacturing center, the fifth largest town in Florida, the greatest fish and oyster market in the state. Moreover, it already was a railroad town-terminus of the Florida Transit & Peninsular.

Plant bought the FT&P – or thought he had. But the owners of this old cross-state railroad (Fernandina to Cedar Key) refused to sell a certain vital property. Only then did Plant, angrily vowing to “wipe Cedar Key off the map,” turn his attention to the fever-wracked village of Tampa, and develop it instead.

This was a period in history when the Iron Horse was king, and the railroads were the arteries of trade and travel.

Why such emphasis on railroads in an essay on hotels? The answer is that the great hotels built by Plant along Florida’s west coast, and his opposite number on the east coast, Henry M. Flagler, and others after them, large and small, would not have been constructed without the existence of rail service. Florida was accessible previously only by water – its Atlantic and Gulf coasts, its inland rivers and lakes – or by slow and comfortless stage coach, or simply by trail-blazing with wagons drawn by horses or oxen.

Then, in the 1880s, Plant pushed his railroads south and west from Sanford (which was connected by the St. Johns River to Jacksonville and points north), and the towns of Haines City, Winter Haven, Auburndale, Lakeland and Plant City came into existence, like beads on a necklace. This was the pattern of growth in Florida – and when the trains brought sun-seeking visitors, accommodations were provided for them. It was the beginning of Florida’s mammoth tourist industry.

Shown here is a selection of hotels in the fifteen counties represented by Tampa Bay History. Some are large, luxurious and still flourishing, such as the Bellevue Biltmore; others, still sturdy and picturesque, have been converted to different uses. Some have been restored, or are being restored, and still others, like the old Orange Grove in Tampa, are long gone and all but forgotten.
Palm Cottage, built in the 1890s as a guest house at the old Naples Hotel, is listed on the National Register of Historic Sites, and serves as headquarters for the Collier County Historical Society. In 1892 the vacant lot on which it is now located was assessed at $5, and the tax was 6 cents.
The prestigious Punta Gorda Hotel, built in the 1880s at the Gulf-side southern terminus of the Florida Southern Railway, was at one time part of the Plant System. It is shown here as it appeared in the early years. Later it became, in turn, the Charlotte Harbor Inn and Charlotte Harbor Spa, and was popular with sportsmen throughout its existence. It had been modernized and streamlined, and its grounds handsomely landscaped, before it burned in 1959.

All photos unless otherwise noted, courtesy of author.

The Naples Hotel at Naples, a modest sixteen-room structure when it was built in the 1880s, was expanded over the years into this long, rambling, elegant building. In the early years a wooden-wheeled cart, used to carry luggage and freight from the city pier was pushed on a wooden tram line to the hotel, a block away along a sandy trail. The hotel was one of the first buildings in Naples. Walter Haldeman, a member of the original hotel corporation, built Palm Cottage in the early 1890s as a guest house to handle the overflow from the hotel. The hotel was closed in 1962 by its then owner, Henry B. Watkins, who bought and expanded the Beach Club Hotel.

Courtesy of the Collier County Historical Society, Inc.
The Rod and Gun Lodge at Everglades City, popular with hunters and fishermen, stands on the foundations of the first home in the area, built by William Clay. The house was bought by William S. Allen in 1873. After Allen’s death in 1889, his property – the entire townsite – was bought by Capt. George W. Storter, Jr. He enlarged the home over the years, to serve as a store and lodge. In 1923 he sold his holdings to Barron G. Collier, who entertained national and international dignitaries there for many years. Now owned by Martin Bowen, the lodge houses guests in three cottages, containing a total of twenty-five rooms. The original building contains the lobby and dining room.

Photograph courtesy of Morris Storter, Gainesville.

Arcadia’s DeSoto Hotel, built about 1904, occupied the upper two floors of this three-story building. The DeSoto National Bank was on the ground floor, the hotel lobby and dining room on the second floor, and guest rooms on both the second and third floors. Balconies faced both Oak Street and DeSoto Avenue. The site became a parking lot.
The Green Terrace Hotel was built in 1926 by the City of Bowling Green, near the northern Hardee County line. It had twenty-four rooms for transients, and a bar and dining room where Friday and Saturday night social activities were held for guests and townspeople. The first meal served was a dinner for the Masonic Order. Later named the Wayside Inn, the hotel had become a retirement home for elderly women by the time James L. Strack bought the building in 1971 and converted it into an alcohol and drug abuse rehabilitation center. It is now named the Bowling Green Inn.

The Everett Hotel at LaBelle, pictured here about 1920, was built in 1911 by E.E. Goodlow, who gave it his name. He later sold his LaBelle property to Henry Ford who, in turn, sold it to Joe B. Hendry about 1930. The hotel boasted a swimming pool which was enjoyed by townspeople as well as hotel guests until it was closed in the late 1940s. The name had been changed to the Hotel Riverside before it burned in 1954. The owners of the hotel at that time, W.B. and Lois Barron, donated the land on which it stood for construction of the Barron Library.

 Courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.
The original sixty-five room Clewiston Inn, built on the ridge of Lake Okeechobee, was the hub of Clewiston’s social life from the time it opened in 1926 until it burned on September 19, 1937. The present Clewiston Inn and Motor Lodge was built in 1938 of brick with steel-lined walls, to withstand the strongest winds that might sweep through the area. Located at U.S. Highway 27 and Royal Palm Way, it has fifty-six rooms and eight apartments. Its bar is noted for a mural of Everglades wildlife, painted by the late Clinton Shepherd of West Palm Beach, covering all four walls. Famous guests at the original inn included President Herbert Hoover, Thomas A. Edison and Harvey Firestone.

Built in 1926 as the Tangerine Hotel, Brooksville’s Windsor Hotel has gained renewed life since December, 1974, when Jean Clymer became its owner and operator. With a three-story main section, the forty-eight room hostelry has two-story wings on either side. Built by a local corporation headed by John C. Emerson, the Tangerine boasted crystal chandeliers and marble floors, and was furnished with wicker furniture. It now has a formal dining room and two lounges, and caters to the traveling public.
The Jacaranda Hotel at Avon Park, built in 1925, still has much of the original furnishings and equipment, including its elevator, installed when the building was constructed. Other original equipment includes the hotel’s sprinkler system (sprinkler heads every eight feet), the refurbished wicker furniture in the lounge, six crystal chandeliers in a banquet room, and a piano, brought from England in 1925. The piano is part of a five-piece orchestra which plays on Sundays after October 1 each year. Modern touches have been added by the present owners, Preston and Ruth Weeks. The picturesque hotel serves both permanent and transient guests.

Harder Hall has been a Sebring landmark since its construction in 1929. Currently owned by Land Resources Corporation, it has 131 rooms. In addition to catering to the traveling public, it is noted for summer golf and tennis camps which attract young players from throughout the country.
One of suburban Tampa’s favorite fun spots in the 1920s and 1930s was Sulphur Springs, with its large swimming pool and alligator farm. Just across the street, and at the end of a streetcar ride north from the heart of the city was the Sulphur Springs Hotel and its accompanying arcade of shops, shown here. Families would sometimes bring a picnic lunch, to be eaten on one of the sidewalk benches in front of the shops. Despite a spirited effort by nostalgic Tampans to save the building, it was torn down to make way for a parking lot.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Built in 1860 as a residence for William B. Hooker, Tampa’s first “mansion-like” home was converted after the Civil War into the Orange Grove Hotel. Captain Hooker’s son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry L. Crane, were operating the hotel in 1876 when famed poet Sidney Lanier and his wife stayed there for three Winter months. Lanier described the building as a “large three-story house with many odd nooks and corners, altogether clean and comfortable in appearance and surrounded by orange trees in full fruit.” The building is shown here as it looked in its early years. By 1924, the front had been remodeled to provide a second floor porch matching the one on the ground floor, and a smaller covered porch had been extended almost to the sidewalk.

Courtesy of the Florida Collection, USF Library.
Known in its early years as the “Queen of the Frontier,” the Royal Palm Hotel helped to transform Fort Myers from a cow town into a popular Winter resort. Built and furnished by Hugh O’Neill of New York, it opened on January 7, 1898, as the Fort Myers Hotel. For a limited time at the turn of the century it was one of the H.B. Plant chain of luxury hotels. The name was changed to Royal Palm after O’Neill planted an abundance of tropical shrubbery on the grounds. The hotel was said to be the first building in Fort Myers wired for electricity, and each of its four floors contained a “ladies’ retiring room with two porcelain tubs.” The hotel housed servicemen in training during World War II. It was dismantled in 1947-48.

Once said to be the home of legendary pirate Jose Gaspar’s favorite wife, Useppa Island now is occupied by the exclusive Useppa Island Club, and the Collier Inn. Useppa Island was such a favorite with tarpon fishermen that in 1902 the Useppa Inn (shown here), with twenty guest rooms, was built. In 1912, Barron G. Collier bought the island and used the inn as his home. In recent years the building has been restored and is now the Collier Inn. About that unlikely name, Useppa: legend has it that Gaspar’s favorite wife was a captured Spanish beauty named Josefa. He named the island for her, and it appeared on government charts by that name for many years. Josefa finally was changed, on the local Cracker tongue, to Useppa. The island is nestled between La Costa and Pine Islands, twenty-five miles west of Fort Myers, and boasts the highest land in Lee County.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.
The Manavista Hotel at Bradenton was built by H.L. Cole, who had been Henry B. Plant’s business manager in Tampa, and opened to the public on January 1, 1907. Its spacious grounds sloped down to the Manatee River, where a private pier served hotel guests. It was remodeled in the early 1920s, and covered with a coat of rough plaster to resemble Spanish architecture. When larger and more modern hotels were built, the Manavista’s clientele diminished, and it was closed about 1945. This picture was taken when the city was still called Bradentown.

The eight-story Dixie Grande Hotel in Bradenton was built during 1925, and opened in February, 1926. Its first occupants were members of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team, who were in the city for Spring training. Originally named the Southland Hotel, it was built by a group of local businessmen. As the Dixie Grande, it was surmounted by a flashing neon sign spelling the hotel’s name. The hotel was destroyed by implosion on August 4, 1974, to make way for the glass-sided eight-story office building of the First City Federal Savings & Loan Association.
The Edwinola Hotel, Dade City’s first major building when it was erected in 1912, now forms the entrance to what will soon be the town’s tallest structure, according to Louis Abraham, a local realtor. In the past seventy years, the three-story building has served as a hotel, an elegant New Orleans-style restaurant, the city’s social center, and the headquarters of a small “university.” An eight-story tower now under construction immediately behind the original structure will house 225 retirement apartments. The old Edwinola, refurbished but retaining its original facade, will contain business offices, administrative offices, dining and recreation facilities.

Pass-a-Grille was little more than a village when Mrs. Anna C. Hartley built the handsome Hotel La Plaza in 1906. She was a daughter of Zephaniah Phillips, Pass-a-Grille pioneer who had built his cabin there twenty years earlier. Renamed the Pass-a-Grille Hotel in 1913, it remained that town’s grandest hostelry for nearly a quarter of a century. It was a square frame building ornamented with Victorian “gingerbread” and surrounded by covered verandas.
Any ground-level photograph of the magnificent Belleview Biltmore Hotel at Belleair can encompass only a part of the famous hostelry. It is said to be the largest occupied wooden structure in the world. Built in 1896 as one of the Plant System chain, it boasted Florida’s first hotel golf course – a six-hole layout – when it opened. It now offers its guests two eighteen-hole courses on the hotel grounds (designed in 1915 by Donald J. Ross) and another nearby. The courses were completely renovated in 1973-74. In addition to the many-gabled main structure, there are several guest “cottages” on the expansive grounds.

The Kibler, Lakeland’s first modern hotel, was built in 1913 at a cost of $125,000 by twin brothers, A.B. and D.B. Kibler. Born in North Carolina in 1874, these men became partners in the phosphate industry in Lakeland in 1907, later adding the hotel to their interests. Six years later they sold it to H.B. Carter, who renamed it the Thelma Hotel. In addition to serving travelers, for many years it was a popular place for civic club meetings and other local gatherings.
The Hotel Wales, built in 1911, was the first major building in Lake Wales. The town was established that year on 5,000 acres of pine woods and virgin land by the Lake Wales Land Company. The hotel later became the Lake Shore Hotel, then the Plantation Inn. Famous for many years for its fine food served by waiters and waitresses in ante-bellum dress, it was in continuous seasonal use until it was destroyed by fire on May 24, 1979, shortly after it had closed for the Summer.

The real estate bubble burst before this six-story hotel at Fort Meade could be completed in the 1920s. This steel and concrete skeleton stood at the city’s main intersection, Broadway and Charleston Avenue, for almost forty years. Inevitably, it was dubbed the Skeleton Hotel. For a number of years before it was torn down in March, 1964, fresh produce stands operated under the shelter of what would have been the floor of the second story.
When Col. J. Hamilton Gillespie, an energetic young man newly-arrived from Scotland in 1886, decided to promote Sarasota by building a hotel, he announced it would be “for people of wealth and influence ... the finest hotel on the entire west coast,” according to Del Marth in “Yesterday’s Sarasota.” The DeSoto Hotel on the waterfront at Main and Gulf Stream was the result. It was opened with a grand ball on Feb. 25, 1887 – the first big social event in that area. The hotel had 30 rooms, lobby and dining room. By 1913 a new wing had been added and the name changed to the Belle Haven Inn; rates were then $2.50 to $3.50 a day. The Inn was razed in 1925. The site is now occupied by the Orange Blossom Club Apartments.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.

The John Ringling Hotel at Sarasota was built in 1926 by Owen Burns, who named it the Vernona, for his wife. About the same time, circus tycoon John Ringling was attempting to build a lavish hotel on nearby Longboat Key, to be known (by payment of a royalty) as the Ritz-Carlton. The building boom burst and that hotel was never completed. Instead, Ringling bought Burns’ El Vernona and gave it his own name. It became a seasonal haven for celebrities of the day. “Nearly everything fashionable that went on in town was held at the hotel, where six chefs in the kitchen served dinner on golden plates that were counted every night,” wrote Del Marth. The hotel later served as an apartment hotel, under the name Ringling Towers. It now stands vacant, the property of Gardinier, Inc.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.
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